

## **BLACK-TAILED PRAIRIE DOG MANAGEMENT**

### **PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:**

Extensive prairie dog habitat is found on BLM lands throughout eastern Montana. Prairie dog towns in southern Phillips County (Malta Field Office) and in southeastern Montana (Miles City Field Office) have been considered for planned black-footed ferret reintroduction efforts.

### **ISSUES:**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) determined in February 2000 that the black-tailed prairie dog warranted listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but action was precluded because other species had higher priority. The FWS later found in August 2004 that proposing a rule to list the black-tailed prairie dog was not warranted and the species was removed from the candidate species list. The black-footed ferret, however, an animal that lives in prairie dog towns, remains one of the most endangered mammals in North America and was listed as endangered under the ESA in 1973. In 1994, an "Experimental Nonessential Population Area" was established in southern Phillips County, Mont.

The Malta Field Office, under the Judith–Valley–Phillips Resource Management Plan, has managed prairie dog towns to provide habitat for black-footed ferrets and other associated species, and to provide opportunities for recreational wildlife viewing and prairie dog shooting. The BLM, in cooperation with other agencies, has tried to maintain the abundance and distribution of prairie dog habitat on BLM land at the 1988 survey level within an area known as the 7-km Complex Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC).

The exotic disease sylvatic plague, however, began to reduce the prairie dog population in July 1992; by 1996, about 80 percent of prairie dogs in Phillips County were lost. Additional plague epizootics (prairie dog die-offs) have occurred across the county as prairie dogs returned, keeping the acres of prairie dogs below the 1988 level. The Malta Field Office in 1998 imposed a voluntary shooting closure on 15 prairie dog towns in the Beauchamp Creek Reintroduction Area, and formally closed them to shooting in October 1999.

The Montana Legislature in 2001 passed a law allowing the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to manage the black-tailed prairie dog as a "species in need of management." The most recent legislative session, however, did not reauthorize the 2001 law, and management status for the black-tailed prairie dog ended on October 1, 2007. Shooting closure signs have been removed and all areas are now open to shooting. Those towns, which have not felt the effects of plague outbreaks, received considerable recreational shooting activity during summer of 2008. The FWS was petitioned again in July 2007 to list the black-tailed prairie dog, but due to other pending petition evaluations the petition will not be evaluated until later in 2008.

Region 6 of FWP completed the Prairie Dog Abundance and Distribution Objectives Plan in April 2006, and although the agency can still work on maintaining prairie dog town complexes for possible ferret reintroductions, it no longer has the authority to close areas to recreational shooting. Previous attempts by BLM to close areas to shooting have been appealed as far as the U.S. Supreme Court, so it is unlikely that the Malta Field Office will take over management of shooting closures due to a lack of authority to manage wildlife populations.

Ninety-five captive-reared black-footed ferrets were released in Beauchamp Creek during 2001 to 2004. Six confirmed litters were produced, but then plague returned in 2004 to many of the dog towns inhabited by ferrets, and animals began to disappear. The latest plague outbreak has continued into 2008. Only one ferret was found during surveys in early September 2006. The animal could not be found again later in September. Additional spot-lighting surveys in July of 2007 and 2008 also found no ferrets. Due to the poor survival rates of released ferrets and the inability to establish a self-sustaining population on BLM lands in southern Phillips County, the Malta Field Office did not request additional ferrets for release in 2006 through 2009.

### **MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:**

Conservation actions are necessary to prevent the black-tailed prairie dog and other sensitive wildlife species from being federally listed, and to assist with black-footed ferret recovery efforts. Plague, however, severely limits what can be done realistically to provide sufficient prairie dog acreage in the proper arrangement for ferret recovery efforts.

### **BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:**

The Malta Field Office is represented on the Prairie Dog Implementation Committee (PDIC), an 11-member advisory group formed to assist and advise the FWP in implementing the Region 6 Plan in a coordinated and biologically-based manner. The group met six times from November 2007 through February 2008 for facilitated discussions on how to implement the Region 6 Plan.

The highest priority of the Region 6 plan is for FWP to establish a "category 1" complex of prairie dog colonies, which

would cover at least 5,000 acres with no more than one mile between colonies. This size is necessary for the successful re-introduction of black-footed ferrets. The plan also calls for several “category 2” complexes of 1,000 – 5,000 acres with no more than one mile between colonies. Although not large enough for ferrets, category 2 complexes are meant to maintain prairie dogs as well as associated species such as the mountain plover and burrowing owl.

The PDIC has recommended southern Phillips County as a suitable location for the category 1 complex. The FWP and the PDIC will next work with the land owners and managers to develop concurrence on an exact location, and finally the FWP will manage for establishment of a complex.

**CONTACT:**

Fritz Prellwitz, Wildlife Biologist, (406) 654-5118, or [fritz\\_prellwitz@blm.gov](mailto:fritz_prellwitz@blm.gov)